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Analysis of definitions of media literacy

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Editorial Board

ABSTRACT

This study provides an analysis of how the term "media literacy" has been defined by authors of articles published in the Journal of Media Literacy Education. It generates answers to two questions: (1) To what extent does there appear to be a shared meaning for the term "media literacy" across authors who publish articles on this topic, and (2) When authors cite definitions of media literacy, which sources do they use most often? The findings of this content analysis reveal that there are a great many definitions being used for media literacy as well as a large number of sources being cited for those definitions. This study uncovered more than 400 definitional elements, which were then organized into a six-category scheme that reflects the full span of thinking exhibited by authors of the 210 articles published in this journal.

Keywords: *media literacy, defining key terms, meaning analysis, citation analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

The term "media literacy" appears frequently in the communication literature as consumer activists, parents, policymakers, journalists, educators, and scholars across the full gamut of academia publish their ideas about what the term means. With so many different kinds of people using the term, a question arises about whether the term has a meaning that is shared across people who publish scholarly articles on this topic.

There are some scholars who believe that there is a high degree of agreement about what media literacy means (Aufderheide, 1997; Livingstone, 2003; Redmond, 2012; Scharrer, 2009; Scharrer & Cooks 2006; Schmidt, 2013; Torrent, 2011). Scholars who argue that there has been a growing acceptance of meaning for media literacy over the past two decades point to two definitions made popular by the National Association of Media Literacy Education. One of these definitions was crafted by 25 scholars who were invited to the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (NLCML). After deliberating for two days, they settled on the following definition: "the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes." The second of these definitions is the National Association of Media Literacy Education's six Core Principles for Media Literacy Education (CPMLE), which was developed in November of 2007.

In contrast, there are other scholars who claim that there is great diversity in what people mean when they use the term (Brown, 1998; Christ, 2004; Fedorov 2003; Hobbs & Jensen 2009; Iaquinto & Keeler, 2012; Lantela, 2019; Maksl, Ashley, & Craft, 2015; Martens, 2010; Palsa & Ruokamo, 2015; Potter 2010; Rogow, 2004). Perceptions of diversity of meaning are not limited to the United States but instead seem to be the case globally (Hipeli, 2019; Parola & Ranieri, 2010; Zylka, Müller, & Martins, 2011).

Research into shared meaning

A few scholars have conducted research to try to determine whether there is a shared meaning for media literacy and if so, what that meaning is. For example, Turin and Friesem (2020) invited media literacy scholars in Israel and the United States to participate in an online survey. The participants were shown 32 potential titles for a final paper in an undergraduate media literacy course and were asked to rate each for relevancy on a 10-point scale. After analyzing the ratings from their 69 respondents, Turin and Friesem reported a significant amount of disagreement about which topics those scholars regarded as being relevant to a media literacy course. The authors said, "Practically each topic was ranked 'zero' by some participants and 'ten' by others" which "means that the same item was often perceived as relevant to media literacy education courses by some respondents and as being completely unrelated by others" (p. 138). There were no differences in the pattern of ratings between Israeli scholars and U. S. scholars, which indicates that differences were due to individual preferences rather than cultural differences.

In a narrative review of the literature of media literacy education, Martens (2010) demonstrated that there were a great many ideas that scholars have been using to characterize what media literacy education has been or should be. Despite the diversity of ideas that he identified in the literature, he argued that there was a fair amount of agreement at a very general level with his conclusion that "Most scholars agree that, at its core, media literacy depends on both knowledge and skills. In particular, individuals need to acquire knowledge about key facets of the mass media phenomenon, such as media industries, media messages, media audiences, or media effects" (p. 14). He also concluded that scholars agreed that people needed to employ skills in order to use this knowledge both to protect themselves from potentially negative effects as well as to empower them to use the mass media more self-consciously and make choices that can improve their lives in many ways.

Claiming that "Large numbers of scholars have been creating a wide variety of definitions since the 1970s" (p. 314), Rosenbaum, Beentjes, and Konig (2008) analyzed how authors of media literacy books and articles were defining the term. These researchers gathered ideas about media literacy from the literature in order to fulfill their purpose of fitting those definitional ideas into an organizational scheme that was developed from their belief that all of media literacy scholarship featured two key concepts, which were media production and media use. The authors claimed these concepts worked together in several reciprocal processes: the media influenced how producers of content worked and the content they produced; producers of content reciprocated by influencing the practices of the media; the media influenced individual users; and users reciprocated by influencing the practices and products of the media. The researchers translated these two reciprocal processes of influence into four categories of knowledge that they refer to as dimensions. One dimension was used as a category to organize knowledge about how the media influence the

producer's ideas about media production. The second dimension contains ideas about how stakeholders construct media content as a result of influence by professional activities and production contexts (cultural, economic, and political). The third dimension is concerned with ideas about how the media influence users both at the societal level as well as the individual level. And the fourth dimension contains knowledge about how people handle the media (selection, managing media use, mobilizing media, and interpreting media content).

Study design

It is the purpose of the current study to build on the work of Turin and Friesem (2020), Martens (2010), and Rosenbaum, Beentjes, and Konig (2008) by conducting a systematic analysis of the published literature in order to identify how the authors of those articles have defined media literacy. It extends previous analyses of meanings for media literacy in several ways. First, this current study updates previous analyses by focusing on articles published in the most recent decade. Second, it does not start with an a priori model and attempt to fit the definitions into it. Instead, it allows categories to form as the analysis progresses. And third, while the current study attempts to organize the definitional ideas that are found in the content analysis of the published literature, it uses the patterns found in the organization to draw conclusions about the degree to which there is a common meaning for media literacy that is widely shared.

In order to fulfill this purpose, this study conducts a meaning analysis and a citation analysis. A meaning analysis is a form of explication where a scholar analyzes the way authors convey their meaning for key concepts in their research (Chaffee, 1991). It differs substantially from the social science method of content analysis because meaning analysis focuses on how authors construct and convey meaning rather than focusing on counting the frequency of occurrence of various clearly manifested characteristics in texts. An example of a meaning analysis, in contrast to a content analysis, is Potter's *An Analysis of Thinking and Research about Qualitative Methods* (1996) where he examined how scholars wrote about the qualitative method in their theory writings as well as their empirical publications and drew conclusions about how they distinguished qualitative methods from quantitative methods.

The meaning analysis involves the examination of the definitions of media literacy that authors offer in their articles in order to identify the component elements that make up those definitions. Those definitional elements are then organized in a way to determine how frequently they appear across all the definitions being examined. If there is a substantial sharing of meaning across authors, then there should be a high prevalence of certain elements appearing in definitions across a large proportion of the examined articles. The citation analysis examines how the authors of articles acknowledge the source of the definitional ideas that they present in their articles. If there is a high degree of sharing of meaning, then there should be a pattern of a large proportion of authors citing the same sources.

Both of these analyses are needed in order to generate the kind of patterns needed to determine the degree to which authors exhibit a common meaning for media literacy. That is, many authors may cite the same source but unless we also examine how authors report the definition of media literacy from that source, we cannot know if authors are really sharing the same meaning. Perhaps the many scholars who cite the same source exhibit different interpretations of what that source says, in which case a high frequency of using a particular source is misleading evidence that many scholars are sharing the same meaning. Also, many scholars may report the same meaning, but unless we analyze the sources they report for those ideas, we cannot determine whether that meaning flows from a small number of influential sources or if that meaning is the same across many different sources so that it does not matter as much which sources are cited by authors.

METHOD

Data Base

The data base for this study is the set of all articles published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education.* This journal was selected because of its ability to attract the writings of scholars who are most concerned about media literacy and most interested in sharing their ideas with other like-minded scholars. From its initial issue in 2009 until the end of 2020, the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* has published a total of 259 manuscripts, which include 210 scholarly articles with the other 49 being reviews of books, websites, apps, and films. The data base for this study is the set of 210 articles.

Procedure

The first step in this study was to download a pdf file for each of the 210 articles. Then an electronic search was performed on each pdf by using the search phrase "media literacy." Each time the term was found, its appearance was examined to determine if the authors were providing a definition for the term, and if they did, a definitional entry was recorded. Thus, the appearance of the term was ignored if it appeared in headings, tables, figures, and reference lists; and when the term was presented in a non-definitional manner. Each definitional entry included the author's full expression of their meaning for media literacy along with their citation of sources for those definitions. If the authors mentioned more than one definition, each with a separate source, then an entry was created for each of these. The entries were then subjected to two kinds of analysis: Citation analysis and meaning analysis.

Citation analysis. The purpose of the citation analysis is to generate patterns that reveal the degree to which authors were relying on a few classic sources or whether they were drawing from a wide range of scholars and institutions for their definitions. All definitions credited to a particular source were grouped together, either by individual scholars as sources or by institutions as sources. This distinction was made in order to assign credit either to the individual who presumably generated the definitional information reported or to an organization where individuals worked together to generate a definition that was the product of a group working under the auspices of the identified organization. When authors presented a definition that came from an institution but was reported by an individual scholar, then the name of the cited scholar was recorded as the cited source, but the definitional entry was placed in the institutional category during the citation analysis. For example, many authors provided a definition for media literacy that came out of the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy. The rapporteur of the conference was Patricia Aufderheide who made this conceptualization widespread in 1993 by publishing *Media literacy: A report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy*, through The Aspen Institute. The definition developed at this conference has been mentioned with a variety of citations, so all references to this definition (or its various permutations) were grouped under the institutional source of National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy. That is, while many authors who cited this source (1992 NLCML) of the definition credited it to Aufderheide (1993), many others did not; if it was clear that the authors were sourcing the definition from the 1992 NLCML, then the citation was credited to that institutional source rather than to the individual scholar who was named in the citation.

Meaning analysis. A meaning analysis was used to gather all the definitions of media literacy that authors present in their articles then analyze each of those definitions to identify the component elements that make up those definitions. Those definitional elements were then organized in a way to determine how frequently they appear across all the definitions being examined. The first step in the meaning analysis was to examine each entry to identify its individual definitional elements. Almost all entries were composed of multiple definitional elements. For example, if authors said something like "media literacy requires skills and knowledge" the analysis of that entry would break it down into two definitional elements – skills and knowledge. In the second step, each definitional element was examined for salient characteristics which were then used to place them tentatively into categories through a process of classification. The challenge of using classification inductively was to identify the characteristics of the elements that were most useful in organizing them into useful groupings. This was an iterative process of trial and error designed to (a) increase the homogeneity of elements within each group, (b) maximize the differences across the groups, and (c) create sub-groupings in order to respect and highlight the smaller differences among elements within a larger grouping.

This meaning analysis generated a structure of six major categories along with some sub-categories: Skills, Knowledge, Beliefs, Behaviors, Motivations, and Macro elements. Table 1 displays the key classification characteristics for each of these six general categories.

The term "competency" appears quite frequently in these analyzed articles, but its use typically indicated that it was a synonym for skills. This is seen in the way many authors switch back and forth between the two terms. Naiditch (2013) illustrates this point when he writes, "media literacy, therefore, includes a series of general competencies, but also a set of sub-skills that are developed in particular contexts, depending on the tasks in which people engage. For example, the ability to analyze is a general competency, but the abilities to problem-solve, examine, and scrutinize can be considered sub-skills of analyze, as they usually refer to specific aspects included in an analysis" (p. 339). There were also times when authors used competencies to refer

to knowledge that they regarded as essential for media literacy. Therefore, in this meaning analysis, when authors used the term "competencies," that usage was analyzed to determine whether those authors were referring to a skill or some kind of knowledge. When authors treated competency as an ability to do something, it was regarded as a skill; when authors treated competency as a need to acquire some kind of factual information, it was treated as knowledge.

Table 1. *Criteria for each of the six categories of definitional elements in meaning analysis*

Element	Definition
Skills	A cognitive ability that humans use to perform a particular task relevant to media use (e.g., evaluating the credibility of a news story, creating an alternative meaning, producing a media message).
Knowledge	Some kind of factual information that authors claim is important for people to acquire in order to be media literate; factual information has a truth value, which means it can be checked for accuracy.
Beliefs	A statement about the nature of things that people regard as true; beliefs do not have an identifiable truth value so they cannot be objectively checked for a truth value; instead, they reflect personal interpretations and subjective perceptions.
Behaviors	A statement about observable actions that people need to perform either once or habitually over time in order to be considered media literate.
Motivations	Drives and desires that were expressed as being relevant to media literacy.
Macro ideas	Statements that authors make about broad characteristics, trends, or patterns that they use to define media literacy; these are typically statements about the purpose of media literacy, how it is organized, and its general nature.

RESULTS

Of the 210 articles that were analyzed, authors of 134 (63.8%) of those articles provided some form of definition for media literacy. In many articles, the authors reported several definitions, each attributed to a different source. Some of those definitions were very short while others extended over paragraphs. Some of those definitions were quoted verbatim from a source, which was either another scholar or an institutional source (such as a professional society, a governmental body or the like). Some of the definitions were not attributed to any source, so they were assumed to be the article authors' personal meaning. The 134 articles that provided a definition of media literacy generated 258 definitional entries. Thus, authors who defined media literacy provided an average of two definitions.

Citation analysis

Of the 258 definitional entries, 111 (43.0%) were attributed to an institutional source, 103 (39.9%) were attributed to a named scholar (or list of individual scholars who shared authorship on the source), and 44 (17.1%) were presented with no attribution. The 103 entries attributed to an individual author were spread over 39 scholars with 30 of those scholars accounting for 30 of those entries (one each), 5 scholars accounting for a total of 15 entries, and the remaining 4 scholars accounting for 49 of those entries.

The 111 citations credited to institutional sources came from 19 different organizations, but almost all of these citations were for either the National Association of Media Literacy Education Core Principles (n = 53) or the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (n = 45). Thus, when we use the 258 entries as a base, the 53 NAMLE Core Principles entries accounted for 20.5% of all definitional entries, and the 45 NLCML entries accounted for another 17.4% of the entries.

Let's take a closer look at the citation patterns of these two popular institutional sources. The most popular single source of definitional elements was the NAMLE Core Principles for Media Literacy. Notice that in Table 2, not all of the six core principles were mentioned when authors used this citation. For example, within those 53 articles where authors cited NAMLE Core Principles, authors of 22 of those articles told readers what the first of those principles was. That is, it was common for authors who cited NAMLE Core Principles to present only a partial list of those six principles; in only 5 articles that used this citation did authors mention all six principles. Typically, authors mentioned only one (n = 17 articles) or two (13 articles) principles.

Table 2. *Frequency of citing NAMLE Core Principles for media literacy education*

Frequency	The Six Core Principles
22	1. Media literacy education requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create.
8	2. Media literacy education expands the concept of literacy to include all forms of media (i.e., reading and writing).
7	3. Media literacy education builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages. Like print literacy, those skills necessitate integrated, interactive, and repeated practice.
12	4. Media literacy education develops informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society.
10	5. Media literacy education recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization.
8	6. Media literacy education affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.

Table 3. *Citations of the definition of media literacy developed by the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (n = 45)*

Frequency	Definition of media literacy
12	AAEC: access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate (Aufderheide, 1993, *n* = 7; Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993; Hobbs, 2008; Hobbs, 2010; NAMLE, 2012; no citation of source)
5	AAECr: access, analyze, evaluate, and create (Aufderheide, 1993; Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2013; Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute, 1992; Livingstone, 2003; Thoman & Jolls, 2006)
5	AAECA: access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act (The NAMLE, 2019, *n* = 2; NAMLE, 2020; NAMLE, n.d. , *n* = 2)
4	AACRA: access, analyze, create, reflect, and act (Hobbs, 2010, *n* = 3; NAMLE 2007; Hobbs 2011)
3	AAEP: access, analyze, evaluate, and produce (Aufderheide, 1993, *n* = 2; Aufderheide, 2001)
2	AAE: access, analyze, and evaluate (Aufderheide 1997; Scharrer & Cooks 2006; NAMLE, n.d.)
1	AAECrCA: access, analyze, evaluate, create, communicate, and act (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1992; NAMLE, 2018)
1	AAECrD: access, analyze, evaluate, create, and distribute (National Council for the Social Studies, n.d.)
1	AAECrRA: access, analyze, evaluate, create, reflect, and act (Hobbs, 2010)
1	AAEPC: access, analyze, evaluate, produce, and communicate (Aufderheide, 1998)
1	AACR: access, analyze, create, and reflect (Hobbs, 2011)
1	AAP: access, analyze, and produce (Aufderheide, 1993)
1	AAPP: access, analyze, process, and produce (Aufderheide, 1993)
1	AE: analyze and express (NAMLE, 2007)
1	AP: analyze and produce (no citation)
1	ARCDA: analyze, reflect, create, disseminate, and act (Tulodziecki, 2012)
1	AUAP: access, understand, analyze, and produce (Aufderheide, 1993; Livingstone, Van Couvering, & Thumim, 2005)
1	AUPC: access, understand, produce, and communicate (Buckingham, 1998)
1	DEA: decode, evaluate, and analyze (Aufderheide, 1993; Center for Media Literacy, 2015)
1	UAECr: understand, analyze, evaluate, and create (Aufderheide 1993; Buckingham 2003; Thoman 2003)

Note. The headings display the 20 configurations of elements that authors attributed to the definition of media literacy that was developed by the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy. The citations under each heading display the source that authors attributed to that definition. While most authors cited one source, there were other authors who cited two or three sources for the definition they were reporting.

In 9 articles, authors cited the Core Principles as a source of information for their definition of media literacy but did not articulate what any of those core principles were.

The next most popular source of definitional elements was some form of the definition of media literacy that was formulated in 1992 at the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy. Notice in Table 3 the variation both tin he configuration of elements in the entry as well in the sources cited. There were 20 different configurations attributed to the conceptualization that came out of the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy. There was also considerable variation in reporting the source of this

definition developed by the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy. The citation with the most appearances was Aufderheide (1993) which was used in 13 entries with other publications by her being reported in an additional four more entries.

Meaning analysis

Each of the 258 definitional entries were analyzed to identify the individual ideas that authors put into those definitions. A total of 434 individual definitional elements were found in this meaning analysis. Thus, across the 134 articles that provided a definition of media literacy, the average was about 3.2 definitional elements per article. For example, an average entry would be something like: Media literacy requires analysis and evaluation of media messages in the context of understanding how messages are produced. When analyzing this entry, we find that it mentions two skills elements (analysis and evaluation) and one element of knowledge (about how messages are produced).

As explained in the Methods section, the individual definitional elements were arranged into groupings when they were found to share some significant characteristic relevant to media literacy. For example, all skills-type elements were put into one group and all knowledge-type elements were put into another group. This was an iterative process where the groupings were continually refined. For example, a definitional element that might at first appear to belong in knowledge-type category during an early round in this iterative process might later be regarded as belonging in a belief-type category because it referred less to factual information and more to a social norm. Also, the iterations served to refine the categories themselves. For example, something that might at first look like a skill upon closer examination be found to be more like a behavior, if the wording of the item indicated authors characterized the idea more by what people were expected to do rather than an ability they had; in this case there was reason to create a new category of behavior.

The resulting organizational scheme has six broad categories of Skills, Knowledge, Beliefs, Behaviors, Motivations, and Macro elements. The largest of these categories is Skills which contains 249 elements that account for 57.4% of all the definitional elements. The Knowledge category contains 74 elements (17.1%); Macro, 76 elements (17.5%); Behaviors, 20 elements (4.6%); Motivation, 8 elements (1.8%); and Beliefs, 7 elements (1.6%).

The 249 elements in the Skills category are organized into six sub-categories: General Skills, Exposure Skills, Information Processing Skills, Production Skills, Social Skills, and Reflection Skills (see Table 4). The Information Processing grouping contains the majority of skills elements (n =144, 57.8%). This large group was then further broken down into five sub-categories of Meaning Matching Skills, Analysis Skills, Critical Analysis Skills, Evaluating Skills, and Meaning Construction Skills. The simplest of these Information Processing Skills is Meaning Matching (n = 11) which refers to the ability of people to recognize symbols (e.g., words, images, sounds, motion) in media texts and being able to recall the denoted meaning they have stored in their memories. This skill is often referred to as decoding. The skill of analysis grouping contained so many entries that it was broken into two separate sub-categories. One sub-category is Analysis Skills (n = 37), which contains elements where authors described the skill in terms of the generic meaning of analysis, such as digging below the surface of something or breaking a message down into components. The other sub-category – Critical Analysis Skills – includes those elements (n = 40) where authors attached the word critical to analysis; the authors of these 40 elements typically talked about why critical analysis (or its apparent synonym critical thinking) were important to media literacy without explaining what makes an analysis "critical" in their minds.

The Evaluating Skills group includes 27 elements. The skill of evaluating involves comparing a message element to a standard then making a judgment about whether the message element meets the standard, falls short of it, or exceeds it. Commonly cited standards are accuracy of news stories, truthfulness of facts, reality of portrayals, aesthetic quality, and usefulness of information). The Meaning Construction Skills group includes 29 elements. Meaning construction skills are abilities that people use to move beyond the simple acceptance of denoted meanings in order to construct their own alternative meanings by using inference, personal interpretations, and prediction.

There were also a lot of entries (n = 53) in the Production Skills grouping, which was further broken down into four sub-categories of Production Message Skills in General, Technical Production Skills, Conceptual Production Skills, and Creative Production Skills. The sub-category of Producing Message Skills in General includes those elements where authors defined media literacy with production skills but did not specify any particular skill. The next sub-category includes

technical skills, such the ability to send text messages, upload images to websites, write a coherent news story, etc. The Conceptual Production Skills sub-category includes abilities to think about what to communicate, how to structure information in the message, as well as how to make it clear, coherent, and persuasive.). The Creative Production Skills sub-category includes abilities to produce novel messages.

Table 4. *Organization of the 249 skills elements found in definitions of media literacy*

Category	Findings
Media literacy skills in general	Authors of 6 articles said that media literacy required skills without naming any specific skills.
Exposure skills	17 elements referred to some type of exposure skill as follows: • *Selection skills*: 9 elements were concerned with the abilities to make selections of media and/or messages. • *Searching skills*: 3 elements mentioned the abilities needed to search for particular messages in the media. • *Accessing skills*: 5 elements focused on the abilities to achieve access to particular media and/or messages.
Information processing skills	144 elements addressed some type of information processing skill as follows: • *Meaning matching skills*: 11 elements described an ability to recognize symbols in media messages (such as decoding) and attach denoted meaning (such as required in for basic reading, listening, watching videos, etc.). • *Analysis skills*: 37 elements articles mentioned the importance of analysis skills (of these 15 simply mentioned that the skill of analysis in general was important to media literacy, 11 specified a purpose for using the skill of analysis, 11 specified a particular too of analysis, such as taking message apart to recognize components; deconstructing; digging below surface meanings). • *Critical analysis skills*: 40 elements highlighted the importance of "critical analysis" (of these 10 elements provided an argument for why critical analysis was important to media literacy in general, 12 elements provided an argument for why critical thinking was important to media literacy in general, 11 elements showcased an argument that critical thinking and active inquiry were both important, 7 elements mentioned a related skill that needed to be critical, such as critical viewing, critical reading). • *Evaluating skills*: 27 elements mentioned the skill of evaluation (of these 11 elements mentioned that the skill of evaluation was important to media literacy, 16 elements clarified a purpose for using the skill of evaluation – critiquing, criticizing, challenging). • *Meaning construction skills*: 29 elements mentioned a meaning construction type skill (of these 9 elements specified a purpose for using the skill, 20 elements specified a particular tool – creating alternative meanings, personalizing meanings, synthesizing).
Production skills	53 elements mentioned some type of message production skill as follows: • *Producing message skills in general*: 22 elements mentioned that media literacy required the general ability to produce media messages without providing any more details. • *Technical production skills*: 14 elements specified a technical type skill about how to create and share messages using media platforms either digital (e.g., blogs, SNS) or traditional (writing). • *Conceptual production skills*: 8 elements specified a conceptual type skill required in producing media messages (e.g., using own experience or a fresh perspective to create messages alternative to what the media provide). • *Creative production skills*: 9 elements argued for the ability to be creative when producing messages (e.g., ability to be fresh, novel, provide alternatives).
Social skills	19 elements mentioned the ability to develop one's social skills (e.g., abilities to be more aware of self and others as they use the media to communicate, play, interact, negotiate, perform, simulate, and multitask; to use the media to manage self and develop relationships with others).
Skills of reflection (thinking about messages)	10 elements mentioned the ability to engage in reflective thinking about the media and one's own use of media (e.g., to think more systematically about their own experiences as consumers and contributors to the media).

Authors of the 19 elements in the Social Skills grouping argued that people need abilities to use the media in their interactions with others as they build and maintain relationships; collaborate with others on projects and activities; and manage impressions of self in social situations. Authors of the 17 (6.8%) elements in the Exposure Skills category argued that media literacy required an ability involved with being able to expose oneself successfully to the media, either by using an ability to make good selections, an ability to conduct a successful search to find a desired content in the media (e.g., using keywords to search on the internet), or an ability to get access to that content (e.g., using the appropriate technology successfully). The 10 elements in the Skills of Reflection category involve abilities to think about one's exposure patterns, the messages themselves, and the possible effects those exposures may have been generating. A small number of these items (n = 6, 2.4%) indicated that media literacy needed skills, but the authors did not specify which skills were needed.

The 74 knowledge elements are spread out over six sub-categories (see Table 5). They generally follow Potter's (2004) organization of knowledge areas – about the media industries, media content, and media effects. In this study there was also a sub-category about Knowledge about the World where authors specified knowledge areas that help people use their skills better to understand and judge media messages. Table 6 displays the definitional elements categorized as behaviors, beliefs, and motivation.

Table 5. *Organization of the 74 knowledge elements found in definitions of media literacy*

Category	**Findings**
Knowledge in general	9 elements mention that media literacy requires the acquisition of knowledge in general
Sets of knowledge	6 elements reference a set of knowledge areas that authors argued were necessary for media literacy.
Knowledge about the media industries	31 elements mention particular areas of knowledge about media industries as commercial businesses and organizations as follows: • *Knowledge about media industries in general*: 3 elements reference knowledge areas about media industries in general. • *Knowledge about structural factors:* 5 elements mention structural factors (the way the industry is organized and especially ownership patterns). • *Knowledge about economics:* 2 elements argue that knowledge of economic factors are necessary for media literacy. • *Knowledge about industry values:* 7 elements argue that media literate people need to have knowledge about the values, motives, and goals of people running the media industries. • *Knowledge about technology of media:* 4 elements claim that media literacy relies on knowledge about how technologies shape media content. • *Knowledge about cultural factors:* 5 elements argue that media literacy relies on knowledge about the influence of cultural factors • *Knowledge about how content is produced:* contend that media literacy is enhanced when people understand the process media use to produced messages and attract audiences.
Knowledge about media content	4 elements argue that media literate people need to have knowledge patterns of content due to the way messages are constructed.
Knowledge about media effects	15 elements mention that media literacy requires people to acquire knowledge about media effect as follows: • *Knowledge about effects that can be attributed to media influence:* 2 elements claim that people need to know what the various effects of the media are. • *Knowledge about how media influence works:* 4 elements argue that people need to know how the process of media influence works in order to understand the eventual effects from media exposure. • *Knowledge about how to avoid/process risk of effects:* 9 elements caution that people need to know certain things so they can control their risk of experiencing a negative effect from media exposure.
Knowledge about the world	9 elements argue that the more knowledge people have about the real world, the more media literate they can be.

Table 6. *Organizations of behavior, belief, and motivation elements in definitions of media literacy*

Category	Elements	Findings
Behavior elements	Behavior in general	7 elements argue that media literacy requires some general behaviors such as engaging with media content in a more meaningful manner or making changes in people's media behaviors.
	Exposure/accessing behaviors	1 element call for the monitoring and regulation of media users' behaviors.
	Message processing behaviors	5 elements define media literacy as helping users improve their habits of inquiry by being more active, observant, questioning, and challenging.
	Production behaviors	7 elements specify that media literacy required people to perform production behaviors to improve their communication skills and also to engage in experiences that will help them understand the nature of media messages better.
Belief elements	Teaching beliefs	3 elements argue that media literacy needs to instill particular beliefs, such as individual responsibility, active citizenship, and avoiding risky behaviors.
	Belief construction	4 elements contend that media literacy needs to stimulate people to construct their own beliefs about their self-efficacy and autonomy.
Motivation elements	Need for motivation	4 elements mention that motivation is an essential part of media literacy (i.e., people must be motivated in order to improve their media literacy).
	Origin of motivation	4 elements specify that motivation is stimulated by skepticism, desire to improve, curiosity, and encouragement from others.

Table 7. *Organization of the 76 macro elements in definitions of media literacy*

Category	Findings
Purpose for the individual	37 elements argue that the purpose of media literacy is to improve the individual in some way: • *Generally improve life:* 5 elements posit that the purpose of media literacy is to help people live a better life in some general way. • *More in control:* 16 elements claim that media literacy's purpose is to give people a means to increase their control over the media by thinking for themselves and giving them a sense of empowerment. • *Better able to protect themselves from potentially harmful effects:* 11 elements say that the purpose of media literacy is to help people protect themselves from potential effects from media exposure than could be harmful. • *More aware of one's world:* 5 elements contend the purpose of media literacy is to make people more aware of their world.
Purpose for society	29 elements articulate a societal purpose for media literacy as follows: • *To keep citizens well informed:* 14 elements say that media literacy serves to improve the flow of accurate information that results in a well-informed citizenry that is required for the successful working of a democracy. • *To stimulate activism:* 8 elements argue that media literacy increases activism that results in improving many areas of society. • *To improve interactions in society:* 7 elements claim that media literacy helps to improve interactions among people in society.
Multi-dimensional	4 elements argue that media literacy is multi-dimensional.
Applies to all media	3 elements claim out that media literacy should apply to all media.
Development	3 elements argue that media literacy needs to be developed.

Finally, Table 7 displays elements where authors provided broad characteristics about what media literacy is or what they thought it should be. These 76 elements are organized into five sub-categories. The first of these sub-categories includes 37 elements where authors made claims about the purpose of media literacy and how it can help individuals, while the second of these sub-categories includes 29 elements where authors made claims about the purpose of media literacy and how it can help improve society in some way. The remaining three sub-categories each contain a small number of elements

DISCUSSION

The major finding of this study is that there is an enormous variety of meaning expressed across authors who write about media literacy. This finding is supported by the patterns found in both the citation analysis as well as the meaning analysis. While the citation analysis found that there were two sources that stood out from all the rest as being most popular, neither of these sources could be considered as a dominant source of a definition for media literacy. The National Association of Media Literacy Education' Core Principles and the definition developed at the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (NLCML) together accounted for less than 38% of all citations, which means that in over 62% of all articles published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, authors ignored or rejected both of these definitions.

The pattern of strong diversity in meaning for media literacy is even more compelling in the results of the meaning analysis where almost every definition for media literacy that did not site either of the two most popular sources presented its own unique configuration of definitional elements. Even more telling is the pattern of diversity found among those authors who cited one of these popular sources of definition. Although we should expect all scholars who cite the definition of media literacy developed at the 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (NLCML) would present the same definition, this was far from the case. Authors of the 45 articles that cited this definition presented 20 different versions of it.

Given this enormous diversity in meaning continually demonstrated across authors who write about media literacy, it is puzzling that there are scholars who claim that there is a common, shared definition. If there is such a sharing of meaning, then it would have to exist at a very high level of abstraction. That is, the meaning would be something very general such as: "Media literacy is a tool that people can use to improve on their experiences with the media." If we are satisfied with a very general definition for media literacy, then it is reasonable to believe that this kind of definition is widely shared. It appears that the authors of about 36% of the studies published in this journal accept this belief because they provided no definition of media literacy in their articles. Thus, it is likely that they believed that there was a common meaning for the term that was so well known and so widely shared that there was no need for them to define it in their article. One of these authors (Torrent, 2011) explained his belief in a commonly shared meaning with the argument:

> Whatever we call it, we all basically know what we are talking about (I'll refrain from composing the list here). What is important is that 'media literacy' is a globally (globally!) accepted term, a framework clear enough to have a discussion about it with representatives of many different professional areas of our communities. I think that this is the result of the thousands of educators who have been diligently educating (often with a touch of true activism) the mediamakers, the policymakers, and the public in general (teachers, parents, social workers, medical workers, etc.) for so many years (p. 23).

While a very general definition could be constructed that would be a kind of umbrella that could cover all the ideas found across all the definitions identified in this study's meaning analysis, the high degree of generality of such a definitional statement would prevent it from having much explanatory value. It would lack the detail needed to explain what kind of a tool media literacy is, how people can acquire such a tool, how they can use the tool once acquired, and in what ways they can use the tool to improve their experiences with the media. Its generality would prevent it from being distinguished from other tools that could help people with the media -- tools such as critical thinking, mindful exposures, self-reflexivity, parental mediation, and willingness to examine one's beliefs and behaviors.

Given the results of this study's meaning analysis, it appears that the majority (62%) of authors of articles published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* were not satisfied with such a general definition, because they presented media literacy definitions composed of specific ideas that served to clarify its essence and distinguish it from many other seemingly related ideas. As those authors presented more details in their definitions of media literacy, those added details could have shown a growing overlap with one another,

which would have indicated a growing consensus of meaning. But this analysis shows this not to be the case. Instead, those added details signified even more diversity of thinking. The meaning analysis found that as authors increased the number of details in their definitions, those definitions became more unique and more differentiated from each other. For example, some authors defined the "tool" of media literacy as being a particular skill or a combination of particular skills. Other authors regarded the tool as being a set of knowledge. Others regarded it as the alteration of beliefs and/or behaviors. And many other authors argued that media literacy is a particular combination of many of these things. There are also important differences across authors in in their expressed beliefs about what it means for media literacy to improve people's media experiences. Some scholars regarded improvement as protecting people from many different kinds of unwanted effects (either by giving them information about what those effects are, or by teaching them how to recognize those effects, or by trying to alter their beliefs, or by reshaping their behaviors), while other scholars regarded improvement as empowering people in a wide variety of ways; and others regarded media literacy as a combination of protectionism and empowerment. When we look at the definitional patterns that emerge from the 134 articles where authors provided their definitions for media literacy, it is rare to see the same configuration of definitional elements presented in more than a few articles.

It appears that the dynamic to increase differences in conceptualizing media literacy is much stronger than the dynamic to pull scholars together into a coherent community built on a foundation of shared meanings. To illustrate this claim, look at the patterns in Tables 2 and 3. Scholars who contend that there is a sharing of meaning for media literacy argue that there are two commonly used definitions (Aufderheide, 1997; Livingstone, 2003; Redmond, 2012; Scharrer, 2009; Scharrer & Cooks, 2006; Schmidt, 2013; Torrent, 2011). The NAMLE Core Principles were cited in 53 articles, and the NLCML definition was cited in 45 articles. While these two were the most often cited sources for definitions of media literacy, together they accounted for only 38% of all citations. And when we look at the actual definitions that authors presented when citing these two sources, we can see that there were significant differences in the ways those authors were perceiving those "standard" definitions. For example, scholars of the 45 articles that referred to the NLCML definition presented 20 different configurations of it – often adding elements from the "standard" definition presented by NLCML, subtracting elements, and/or renaming elements. And scholars of the 53 articles that referred to the NAMLE Core Principles rarely characterized those six principles for their readers in the same way. Thus, the authors who cited one of these sources rarely presented the same interpretation of the definition created by the institution that was being cited. Beyond these two sources, there was even more variation in definitions.

The high degree of diversity in definitions for media literacy is even more apparent when we look at the results of the meaning analysis. Authors of the 134 articles that displayed definitions of media literacy for their readers presented 258 definitional entries that included a total of 434 definitional ideas. The one area of high agreement was that almost all of the articles that provided a definition for media literacy said something about the need for skills; however, as authors specified which skills were essential to media literacy, considerable differences arose.

Some authors talked about the need for exposure skills (how to search for messages, how to make good selections among all the available choices, and how to get access to particular messages); others specified some kind of information processing skill (how to read messages in more depth, how to evaluate messages on all sorts of standards, how to construct one's own meaning); others argued for the importance of production skills (technical abilities, conceptual abilities, and creative abilities); still others detailed the importance of social skills and/or reflection skills. While almost all authors defined media literacy as relying on skills, few authors defined media literacy with the same configuration of skills. And the variations in definitions grew larger when we considered whether authors included elements of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and motivations in their definitions.

This wide variation of definitional elements, the diversity of interpretations of widely quoted definitions, and the frequent citing of alternative sources for the same idea leads to the conclusion that scholars who write about media literacy exhibit considerable variety in their meanings for the term. It appears that everyone who writes about media literacy has a different perspective on what it is or what it should be, unless we keep our focus at the most general level of meaning. This raises the question about how this sharing of meaning only at the most general level benefits or limits the development of media literacy as a scholarly field.

Implications

Can scholars build a viable field of study on a foundation where there is a high degree of agreement about the field's focal concept only at the most abstract, general level? The answer to this question depends on what those scholars value most. If scholars value diversity, openness of ideas, and creative expansion of thinking, then the generality of the accepted definition for media literacy is a good thing, because it keeps the boundaries of the field purposely ambiguous and welcomes any idea that anyone wants to contribute. It is a wide-open forum for all kinds of perspectives on what media literacy should be and encourages a seemingly limitless stream of ideas about how it could achieve those many purposes. It is a field that attracts all kinds of scholars because all viewpoints are equally respected. A field based on such a value would track the degree of each term's worth by measuring how many definitional elements it has accumulated and how diverse those elements are. In such a field, scholars would be encouraged to create new definitions to expand the diversity rather than to search for the most useful meanings of terms and to build progressively toward a common language that joins authors together in a scholarly community.

Alternatively, the diversity of meaning can be regarded as a negative characteristic that slows down the development of knowledge, because it resists the establishment of a core of knowledge that all members of that scholarly community recognize and use as a shared foundation. When a field lacks a commonly shared definition for each of its key terms, the field's literature becomes balkanized into groups of scholars each characterized by holding different meanings for the field's most important concepts. While this balkanization serves to reinforce the sharing of beliefs across members inside the same niche, it makes it more difficult for scholars to network effectively with scholars in other niches because of the effort required to understand and work around the many differences in meanings that have served to divide scholars into those niches. Scholars in one niche who want to read across the general literature of media literacy so that they can perceive patterns across the full set of niches must continually compare "apples and oranges" because of the differences in the ways media literacy is conceptualized and operationalized in each study. These differences increase the amount of work scholars must invest when trying to perceive broader patterns of knowledge beyond their niche. Scholars who are unwilling to invest this effort limit themselves to either (a) locking their perceptions into the particular perspective that defines their niche or (b) forming unwarranted interpretations about the nature of the broader field.

The diversity of ideas about how the field defines its focal concept makes it very difficult to impossible for outsiders to understand what the field is. Students, scholars new to the field, journalists, and the public in general who want to know what media literacy is are likely to get a very different impression of what media literacy means depending on which authors they read. Outsiders will find it impossible to know who to trust to tell them what they need to know about the field, so they are likely to accept the meaning from their exposure to one random definition.

The diversity of meanings in circulation also creates significant challenges for educators who want to create an instructional unit of any scale -- lesson, intervention, course, or curriculum. With limited resources, educators depend on a research literature to tell them which learning objectives are the worthy to pursue and which should be avoided; which instructional elements have been the most successful; and which measures have the best track record of generating valid data. If that literature is composed primarily of hidden differences, then designers of media literacy lessons are presented with an overwhelming number of options with little guidance because each element is treated as being equally valid.

As for learning objectives, scholars have observed that it is difficult for designers of interventions and lessons to craft learning objectives for specific lessons because the purposes of media literacy as expressed in the literature are so varied (Ashley et al., 2012; Christ, 2004; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Scharrer, 2002). Scholars who read through the literature to try to determine the essence of media literacy are confronted with so many ideas that it leaves them with the impression that anything goes. Therefore, media literacy programs and interventions vary so widely that it is difficult to see what they have in common. Recall that Turin and Friesem (2020) found a wide range of perceptions about what media literacy education is and what it should be, which led the authors to conclude that there is a continuing lack of one standard approach.

Designers of media literacy educational efforts find that the treatment of learning objectives in the published research is so general that it fails to provide them with much guidance. For example, Bergsma and Carney (2008) argue that media literacy scholars and

professionals should be more precise in describing the concepts and skills they include in their lessons. Scharrer (2002) reasons that even though there is a generalized understanding about what media literacy outcomes are, they are often not explicitly defined and measured. Christ (2004) argues that the term media literacy needs to be more clearly defined and that standards and competencies need to be developed in more detail in order to provide an adequate basis for measuring media literacy outcomes. He states that most higher education faculty would claim that they teach media literacy however, they may not be able to express what they mean with regard to the term and much less be able to assess it with learning outcomes.

When scholars are fuzzy about what media literacy is and how educational experiences can be designed to increase it, then it becomes impossible to design measures with adequate validity (Bergsma & Carney, 2008; Kubey, 1998; Livingstone & Thumim, 2003; Martens, 2010; Scharrer, 2009; Schilder, et al. 2016). For example, Livingstone and Thumim (2003) observe that there is little consensus over the appropriate way to measure media literacy. This is reflected in the variety of ways media literacy is assessed. A challenge that may relate to this lack of systematic implementation of media literacy assessments across different educational systems is that media literacy criteria and outcomes are not always clearly defined. Similarly, Bergsma and Carney (2008) suggest that media literacy professionals and scholars "should be more explicit about the media literacy core concepts/skills they include in their interventions and should more carefully address who delivered the intervention with what fidelity, in what setting, for how long and utilizing what pedagogical approach" (Schilder et al., 2016, p. 34). Martens (2010) argues that evaluating and explaining the effectiveness of media literacy education is one of the most overwhelming challenges to be addressed by research in the field.

The task of educating students about the essence of any body of knowledge expands enormously with the number of meanings in circulation for each term used. Students who read through a literature first need to learn the meaning of what each term is. Once a meaning for a term is learned, students can read through large portions of the literature efficiently because they can easily match the one denoted meaning to the term each time they encounter it. However, if the meaning of a term is different with each piece of writing, then the task of learning about a field becomes enormously more difficult because students must learn the different meaning being used by each author then keep all those many meanings straight as they continue to read.

Recommendation

It may seem that I am calling for the establishment of a single definition that would be shared by all scholars in the field. But I am not; that would be unreasonable given all the definitional work that has stretched the range of meaning to such a degree.

There are two recommendations that can reasonably be made given the picture that the results of this citation and meaning analysis present. First, scholars who write about media literacy need to present their meaning to readers rather than assume that all readers share the same meaning that authors hold for the term. Media literacy is not a primitive term, because there is no evidence for a commonly shared meaning. Instead, there are many meanings for the term in circulation. Some of those meanings differ from one another in minor ways and some differ in more major ways. But even small difference in meaning can cause problems when a reader holds a different meaning than the authors do. Therefore, a minimum requirement for scholarly publication should be that authors who write about media literacy recognize the diversity of meaning in play and use that diversity as a context for clearly presenting the meaning they are using in their publication.

Second, scholars who do express their meaning for media literacy in their writings need to do so with more clarity, completeness, and precision. It is not sufficient to simply name the source of a commonly cited definition and assume that this is enough to convey their meaning clearly and completely. As was found in this study's citation analysis, authors who refer to the same citation do not all hold the same meaning for what that citation presents. The results of this citation analysis show that authors have frequently added, subtracted, and re-named the components in a cited definition. Of course, scholarship allows for the altering of definitions when authors need to do so in order to achieve the purposes of their writings better. However, when authors make such alterations, they need to be clear about what those alterations are and present an argument for why their changes contribute something of value to the scholarly field. When authors cite a common definition but present their idiosyncratic interpretation of it rather than reporting the original meaning accurately, they are contributing more to chaos and confusion instead of knowledge.

It is likely that the idea of media literacy will continue to stimulate even more meaning elements and that many of these authors will assemble these meaning elements into an even greater number of unique configurations. Unless the two recommendations presented above are implemented, it is likely that this growing diversity will continue to be masked by the persistent assumption that we are all sharing the same meaning. Communication of meaning will become much more of a challenge for authors and readers, for instructors and students, and for study designers and reviewers. When we cannot read the work of colleagues with adequate comprehension, we are less likely to value their ideas and cite them. Instead, we become more isolated as our connections to the contributions of others evaporates, and the field's sense of community erodes away.

CONCLUSION

The term "media literacy" seems to hold an odd position. It has accumulated a great many definitional elements that suggest that it has a deeply rich and complex meaning. But at the same time, many scholars seem to assume that all readers of the media literature share a common meaning for the term by the way they treat it as a primitive term – either by neglecting to provide any definition or by providing suggestive definitions in place of rigorous, complete definitions. This makes it seem that the term is regarded as having magical powers – as if it is a cultural archetype that is commonly understood by all people even though it is so complex, deep, and timeless that it defies attempts to define it. This magical nature of the term is also reflected in the wide variety of ambitious claims scholars make for it. As this study has found, media literacy is regarded as being a conglomeration of a great many skills including the ability to read, evaluate, analyze, imagine possibilities, deconstruct messages, recognize patterns, challenge meanings, judge credibility, decipher sender intent, counter-argue, dig for truth, avoid influence, and produce messages, to name but a few. In addition to all that, it is often characterized as being composed of many other factors beyond skills, such as many kinds of knowledge, a variety of behaviors, and motivations. Furthermore, scholars claim that media literacy has the power to help us improve a wide range of other skills and abilities; it can also protect us from false messages in the media, create positive habits from scratch, and transform risky behaviors into positive actions; it can alter faulty beliefs (about self, identity, health, community, religion, and media bias) while protecting our existing beliefs that are not faulty in some way; and it can increase our degree of engagement with the media, other people, institutions, and society at large.

This large accumulation of ideas is indeed impressive in what they promise. But scholarly fields need to do more than promise; they need to create the knowledge that will deliver on those promises. As media literacy scholars, we need to consider the degree to which we increase the challenge of sharing knowledge when we exhibit so little sharing of a common meaning for our most essential concept.

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